A note on the relational nature of possession

A NOTE ON THE RELATIONAL NATURE OF POSSESSION*

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1. Introduction

Possession is an old and new theme of linguistic analysis. Innumerable studies have been, and are being, devoted to the analyses of the possessive constructions in traditional or descriptive grammars as well as in the theory-oriented grammars. However, no persuasive solutions have ever been brought forth yet.

There are some reasons for this, but I would like to point out two of them here. The first one is related to the 'fuzziness' of Possession. For example, an expression like *John's book* will be vague or indeterminate as to its interpretation, which will only be disambiguated by the context. Even an apparently simple expression such as *John's car* can be ambiguous: *the car John owns, the car John is driving now, the car John designed, etc.* In addition, while the meaning of Possession is 'fuzzy', Possession is also regarded as 'a universal domain' (Heine 1997). Presumably, there will be no human community in which Possession finds no place as a semantic domain, and, therefore, every human language is expected to have given it a linguistic expression in some form or other. So it is quite understandable that linguists have been intrigued by this 'fuzzy', 'universal' concept. The problem,

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however, is that they have assumed that there must be something out there behind Possession and tried to discover some core meaning or to add refinements to taxonomy. This, I suppose, is unfortunate, in that they put the focus of attention onto the superficial side of the fuzziness. In other words, they have failed to turn their eyes to what contributes to the 'fuzziness' *i.e.*, the relational nature of Possession.

The second point concerns this relation. Mainly because of the reasons just mentioned above, it is only recently that the concept of relation has come to the fore in the discussion of Possession. Particularly, since the emergence of the theoretical framework called Cognitive Grammar, the relational nature has been, or at least appears to have been, duly treated. However, Cognitive Grammar, in my view, seems to commit itself to the fallacy of assuming that RELATION IS MEANING, and this will be another topic of special interest to us in this paper.

The purpose of the present paper is to show that (i) relation and meaning are two different concepts: the former is syntactic and the latter is semantic, and (ii) relation is not necessarily lexicalised.

2. Morphemic status of the possessive marker

2.1 The main objective of traditional grammars lies in description or taxonomy of linguistic facts, and, unsurprisingly, different grammarians suggested different classifications. Take Poutsma (1914-16:41), for example. He classifies the genitive (*i.e.*, possessive) structures as follows:

(1) a. genitive of possession: *my brother's books*
b. genitive of origin: *the pheasant's nest*
c. the subjective genitive: *Elizabeth's reign*
d. the objective genitive: *Gordon's murder*
e. the genitive of measure: *an hour's interval*
f. the genitive of apposition: *Tweed's fair river*

The taxonomy of this type, however, will never fail to leave with us the impression that it might not exhaust the whole range of uses of possessive expressions. This is, indeed, the case. Consider the next examples:

(2) a. *Tennis's* Henry Austin dies at 94 —The *Scotsman*, 28 August 2000

b. Letters written by the *children's* author Lewis Carroll shortly before his death have been found in a locked journal and are being heralded as an important literary discovery. —*The Scotsman*, 22 August 2000.

It will be evident that the examples above are not associated with any categories cited in (1). More examples of similar status will be readily available. Thus, the fuzziness of Possession defies whatever elaboration will be made on the classification. Moreover, we should note that the fuzzy nature of Possession is not a matter of degree. It is not the case that the boundary, for example, between 'genitive of possession' and 'genitive of origin' is fuzzy. Neither is it the case that the varieties of possessive expressions can be explained in terms of prototypical semantic structures and their metaphorical or network extensions. However, this is the approach taken by Heine (1997).

While admitting the fuzziness of Possession and the importance of the concept of relation, Heine (1997:144) postulates the following "source schemas" for attributive possession:

(3)

Formula	*Label of event schema*
Y at X	Location
Y from X	Source
Y for/to X	Goal
X with Y	Companion
(As for) X, X's Y	Topic

Unfortunately, however, we should say that (3) is another version of (1) and will be exposed to the same criticism; it is highly debatable whether all the possessive constructions can be explained in terms of such a limited number of formulas. Since his primary objective lies in explicating the Possessive structures from the universal point of view, he does not give English examples. However, instances that cast doubt on the above schema are not difficult to come by. For example, a simple expression like *five minutes' walk* will be problematic. And the expressions like *tennis's Henry Austin* and *the children's author* cited in (2) do not seem to fit into the Schemas above. The most likely candidate for the last two might be the Topic schema. However, the status of the Topic schema is very dubious; the Formula 'As for X, X's Y' looks like a tautological genitive structure. Most of the genitive constructions seem to be associated with this characteristic.

These deficiencies seem to be the result of a failure to recognize the relational nature in Possession. Possession is fuzzy because it is relational and because it is productive.

2.2 What, then, is relation and where does relation come from? In order to deal with this problem, it will be convenient to juxtapose relation and entity. This might seem a terminological issue, but it is not.

When we speak of meaning of a word or a morpheme, we usually mean that it has a referent either in the outside world or in the mental world. This applies particularly well to the words which are regarded as belonging to the Open Class. For example, 'a tree' refers to a concrete object in the outside world, 'a dream' refers to an abstract image in our mind: 'to run' and 'to think' refer to a physical and mental activity, respectively; 'slowly' refers to a manner of movement; 'quiet' refers to a temporal state and 'red' refers to an attribute of an object. We may have to bear in mind here the differences in the degrees in referentiality there are among the word classes: first-order entity, second-order-entity, or third-order entity

(cf. Lyons 1977:443). However, we could suppose that these differences are attributed to the differences in the nature of the referents as such and, therefore, in our ways of recognition of the world. As far as the linguistic 'signs' are concerned, we can regard the Open Class words as having the function of referring to or designating entities whether or not they are concrete or abstract. And the entities are cultural products. It is because these entities, *i.e.*, words, are direct reflections of the speech community in which the language is used that they are always productive or in 'perturbation' (Emonds 1987), hence Open Class. We can reasonably say that they have a referential function. A referential, or representational, characteristic is a fundamental trait of linguistic signs.

This is even the case with the grammatical morphemes such as *-ed* (the past tense morpheme), *-s* (the third person singular morpheme in the present tense), and *-s* (the plural morpheme). While the Open Class words refer to the entities in the outside or mental world, these morphemes refer to the grammatical notions. For example, the grammatical morphemes cited above designate the notions of "past tense" [1], "third person singular present", and "plurality", respectively (cf. Talmy 1988). Thus, the semantic contribution the inflectional morphemes in general make is unambiguously simple, so that there is a strict one-to-one correspondence holding between the linguistic sign and its denotation. This, apparently, seems to constitute a fundamental difference between the Open Class words and the grammatical morphemes, in view of the fact that the Open Class words are often said to be ambiguous as the discussions over prototypicality show. However, the fact that a word is ambiguous or polysemous does not affect its being referential. Rather, ambiguity or polysemy should be attributed to the obvious fact that the word in question refers to something; in other words, a word can be REFERENTIALLY ambiguous.

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1 The past tense morpheme *-ed* is also used in the subjunctive or hypothetical constructions. I am assuming that this use is also motivated by the function of *-ed* form; the 'past tense' is transferred from the real world into the hypothetical domain.

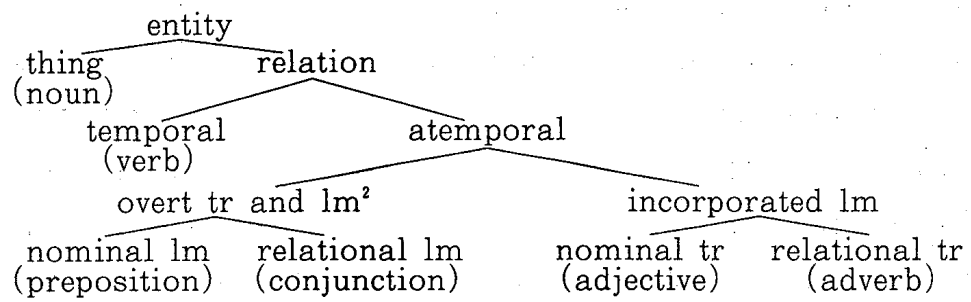
Therefore, we can suppose that the Open Class words and the grammatical morphemes share a common characteristic, in that they have the function of referring to an entity. The difference between them lies in the fact that the entity the Open Class words refer to is semantic, or cultural, while that which the grammatical morphemes designate is syntactic or grammatical. In this way, we can argue that every morpheme has a referential entity.

3. Relation and entity

Now let us turn our attention to the possessive morpheme *'s*. It is clear enough that the status or nature of the possessive morpheme is in sharp contrast to other morphemes, in that *'s* lacks any semantic or even grammatical notion to refer to; this is so much so that even the notion possessive may be inadequate as a cover term. If, as cognitive grammars maintain, every morpheme is meaningful, what meaning does the possessive morpheme have?

Taylor (1996:91) gives the following classifications of words, which constitutes the most fundamental premise of Cognitive Grammar:

(4)



Although we cannot go into a detailed discussion of (4), two points should be made here. What is remarkable, first of all, is the supposition that Entity consists of Thing and Relation. According to Cognitive Grammar, an expression profiles either a thing or relation. "[It] is either nominal in character, or relational. The possibility of borderline, or 'fuzzy' cases, it would seem, is not entertained" (Taylor

2 Here, 'tr' and 'lm' stand for Trajector and Landmark respectively. See below ↗

1996:83). It may be true that Verb, Preposition, Conjunction, Adjective or Adverb are more relational than Noun is, but it is rather hard to conceive that there is so sharp a distinction between 'thing' and 'relation' as Taylor maintains in (4). Consider the following examples:

(5) a. *Small* is now *beautiful.* —*The Scotsman*, 1 September 2000.
b. *Rather plump* seems to be how he likes his girlfriends. —Radford (1981)
c. *A little too carefully* seems to have been how he addressed the judge. —Radford (1981)
d. Will'*t* please your highness *walk?* —Maetzner (1874)

The examples above show that an adjective, an adverb or even a verb can occupy the position of subject, which indicates that these words can refer to a 'thing'. Of importance here is the fact that, although the expression sounds rather archaic, a bare form of a verb in (5d) can be used as a noun since the pronoun *it* refers to the verb *walk.* The bare form expresses a 'bare' or abstract notion. Thus, the infinitive is an "abstract expression of the activity" and, therefore, "from its abstract nature, it may appear as a genuine substantive, therefore may itself become the subject of the sentence" (see Maetzner 1874). If there is a sharp dichotomy between thing and relation, a verb can never be used as a noun or a subject. The distinction between 'thing' and 'relation' cited in (4) is not so clear-cut.

The second point concerns the difference between prepositions and adverbs. Consider the next pair of sentences:

(6) a. The boss is *in* the office.
b. The boss is *in.* —Taylor (1996:90)

According to Taylor (1996), the different uses of two *in*'s in (6) should

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concerning his treatment of Preposition and Adverb and see Chapter 4 of Taylor (1996) concerning the further subdivisions of 'relation'.

be ascribed to the fact that 'landmark' is 'overtly expressed' in (6a), while it is 'incorporated' in (6b) (also, see the figure (4) above). Taylor maintains that prepositions differ from adverbs in that the former require two nominal entities, *i.e.*, 'tr' and 'lm', and the latter require only one 'relational tr' *i.e.*, a predicate verb. However, it is not the case that prepositions always require two entities, as the following sentences show:

(7) a. Take the book from *under the bed.*
b. *Under the bed* is where I put it.
c. *Under the bed* is dusty. —Taylor (1996:86)

In order to explain the sentences in (7), he resorts to a new notion of what he calls 'profile shift' (p.87 and pp.242-5), which, essentially, means that a relational expression (*i.e.*, a verb) can be construed as a nominal expression (*i.e.*, a deverbal noun). This, however, poses a serious problem for the dichotomy between the 'thing' and the 'relation'. If a 'relation' can be 'shifted' into a 'thing', there would be no reason to maintain the dichotomy. Otherwise, the postulation would be an arbitrary explanation of the phenomena. At the very least, an argument will have to be constructed to show why and in which cases the 'shift' is possible.

Ironically, however, a 'relation' can be a 'thing' only if there is a shared property involved. We should assume that the 'shift' is made possible because 'relational' words denote, in fact, 'things'. More correctly, prepositions (locational prepositions, in particular) are associated with not only 'relational' characteristics but also spatial and, therefore, referential meanings, which are 'things'. Moreover, we should say that the relational nature of locational prepositions should derive from the fact that they have a locational meaning. In short, it is the locational meaning that makes it relational, and it is the 'thingness' that triggers the 'shift'.

The discussion so far strongly suggests that the Open Class

words, or even 'relation' words (in Taylor's sense), have a semantic entity (or 'thing' in Cognitive terms) to refer to and that the semantic entity should not be confused with 'relation'; it is misleading to assume that 'thing' and 'relation' be subsumed under 'entity' as in (4). It would be counter-intuitive, too, to argue that the word 'today' in 'today's weather' "designates a period of time construed as a thing" and in 'I saw John today' "designates a relation between an event and a period of time" (Taylor 1996:83); both should be interpreted as an expression of time, hence thing.

A relation, in the true sense of the word, can never be an entity, nor can an entity be a relation. What makes this very evident is the clear difference between them in the mode of lexicalization. No one would object to the assertion that 'Subject-of' or 'Object-of' is a relational concept, and that no language resorts to a lexical item to express such relations. Thus, some languages employ a purely syntactic system such as word order, and others, morphological devices of one sort or other, *i.e.*, inflectional endings, postpositional particles, *etc.* What is interesting, but, unfortunately, has been overlooked in the discussion of Possession is the fact that even the notion subject or object is 'fuzzy' in terms of semantics. Consider the next examples:

(8) a. *John* opened the door.
b. *The wind* opened the door.
c. *The key* opened the door.
d. *The door* opened.
e. *This summer* has seen the end of water restriction in the area. —*CIDE*

The italicized subjects are in a variety of relations to their predicate verbs; *John* in (8a) is the agent of the action, *the wind* in (8b) is the cause of the event of 'opening', *the key* functions as an instrument, and *the door* in (8d) is the 'object' of opening, which is regarded as in the same relation as *the door* in (8a) (see also Fillmore 1968). *This*

summer in (8e) indicates the time when the event happened. In spite of a number of attempts to explicate the semantic diversities that hold between a subject and a predicate verb, no study, to my knowledge, has succeeded in pin-pointing the core meaning or function of subject.

This is also the case with the Object-of relation.

(9) a. As well as *Aida*, the company, under the auspices of the British-based Opera & Ballet International, is also touring *Tosca* and *the Marriage of Figaro*. —*The Scotsman* (S2 Monday), 18 September 2000

b. Our main objective has been to provide a book through which the student will gain skill and assurance in the techniques of A-and AS-level English and will be able to sit *the examination* with confidence. —*A LEVEL ENGLISH*

c. Party *your way* into a brand new life at Edinburgh. —*EUSA Diary*

d. John built/destroyed *the house*.

The sentence (9a) should be contrasted with another use of *tour* as in *to tour Europe*, in which *Europe* is a location, while *Tosca* and *the Marriage of Figaro* in (a) is the titles of opera to be performed on the tour. The verb *sit* in sentence (9b) are different in meaning from the one in *This table sits four*, for example. (9c) is what Levin (1993) calls 'X's Way Construction'. And *the house* in (9d) differs in meaning depending on the verbs used in construction with. To these may be added the objects of verbs such as *resemble*, *reach*, etc. As is clear from these examples, the objecthood, as well as transitivity, varies, and they are still objects. See also Lakoff(1977) in this connection.

Now, what we should note here is the fact that such relations as Subject-of and Object-of are fuzzy in terms of semantics and that the fuzziness is caused by the two entities (*i.e.*, the subject and the

predicate verb, on one hand, and the predicate verb and the object, on the other) being adjacent to each other. And, most importantly, we know that these adjacent words are connected by some relations and we know that there are such relations not because they are lexically or morphologically represented in English, but because they are expressed by means of a syntactic device, *i.e.*, word order. So, we can reasonably assume that RELATION IS NOT MEANING (or ENTITY). Rather it is some invisible principle that makes it possible for the two entities to be adjacent to each other. The problem, then, is what is this invisible relation that keeps the two entities in position; this constitutes one of the important themes of linguistic analysis.

4. Conclusion

The peculiarity of the possessive marker *'s* will now be obvious. Unlike other inflectional morphemes, it is not associated with any particular semantic entity whatsoever, nor in the least with any grammatical one. Let us recall here that the possessive morpheme *'s* connects two entities. The alleged fuzziness or ambiguity should be ascribed to this fact. Just as the semantic relations between the subject and the predicate verb and between the predicate verb and the object are anomalous, the semantic relation between the possessor and possessee is ambiguous and fuzzy, since two lexical entities are adjacent to each other.

Then comes the next question: what is the function of the possessive morpheme? I would answer that the function of the possessive morpheme is to dictate that the construction is NP, not S. It is only here that the reference-point analysis suggested by Langacker (1993) and Taylor bears any relevance to the description of possessive constructions; otherwise they do not seem to provide us with principled explanations. Based on Langacker's premise, Taylor (1996:17) maintains that "in opting to use a possessive expression, the speaker is instructing the hearer on how best to identify the referent that he, the speaker, intends." No one can object to this statement.

However, we should remember that this description is valid only in so far as any semantic content or entity is denied to the possessive morpheme, and that this reference-point analysis is also universally relevant to the semantic relation between the subject and its predicate in a sentence. Possession is a purely RELATIONAL concept, and it is not susceptible to lexicalization.

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